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Friday's Feature

By

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Termites in mulch, fact or fiction

Over the past few weeks, gardeners have been inundated with an email concerning Formosan termites being spread in mulch from Louisiana. This email has captured everyone's attention, but is it true?

The rumor swirling about the Internet is that termites are being spread throughout the country by large chain stores via bags of landscape mulch. The rumor implies that the trees that were blown down following last year's hurricanes were turned into mulch and the state is trying to get rid of tons and tons of this mulch to any state or company who will come and haul it away.

It is true that there is a lot of cellulose debris (wood) in Louisiana following hurricanes Katrina and Rita. It is also true that Formosan subterranean termites are known to be in the parishes affected by the hurricanes.

And while it is true that termites can be found in mulch, their survivability rate is low for several reasons. The ability of the termites to survive the chipping process to create mulch is poor; additionally, once separated from the colony, their ability to survive further decreases. Finally, even when termites are found in mulch, mulch-fed termites suffer significantly lower survivorship.

In terms of spreading invasive species like the Formosan subterranean termite, the greater problem is associated with the transport of large chunks of wood containing enough termites to sustain reproductive forms. For example, infested railroad ties used in the landscape or salvaged timbers from razed structures. These are known to be associated with the spread of the Formosan subterranean termite.

This is not to say that termites are not found in association with mulch. Mulch increases the ability of termites to survive where they are already established by keeping the soil moist and temperatures moderate. Mulch laid too thickly, greater than four to six inches deep, can provide a "bridge" over the treated perimeter of a house, allowing termites to walk over from the landscape to the house and avoid contact with soil that has been treated with termiticides.

Mulch is an important part of landscape maintenance. The experts, however, recommend maintaining a zone of at least one foot around the outside of your home that is clear of plants and other landscaping materials. This reduces soil moisture and makes it easier to inspect for shelter tubes coming up from the ground.

There are numerous ways you can reduce the chance of your home being infested by Formosan and other subterranean termites. Avoid wood to ground contact, including storing mulch off the ground. Remove any wood or cellulose-containing material (such as cardboard) that is in direct contact with bare ground. Do not leave wooden items such as planters, trellises, railroad ties, firewood, and stakes on top of or in bare ground. Install rain gutters to prevent water from dripping down around the perimeter of your home. Air conditioner condensate lines and gutter downspouts should empty out at least one foot away from the base of the home. Remove dead trees and plants including the roots and stumps, if possible, from your yard. For more tips on protecting your home, review the UF/IFAS publication entitled "Formosan Subterranean Termite." It's available online at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG064> or by calling your local Extension Office.

Finally, maintain termite protection measures for your house. Protection measures most commonly include soil treatments, bait systems, or wood protection measures. Remember to use a licensed and reputable pest control company.

The Louisiana Department of Agriculture imposed a quarantine for the Formosan subterranean termite on October 3, 2005, in all the parishes affected by the hurricanes. To report a quarantine violation, call (225) 925-3763. The Department of Agriculture and Forestry's Web site, www.ldaf.state.la.us, and the LSU AgCenter's Web site, www.lsuagcenter.com, contain information about the quarantines, Formosan termites and debris disposal.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>